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JANUARY-MARCH
2025

Birth of a home

Urbana Realtor
shares winding
tale of building
her new abode
— from start
to finish

Form and function

Interior designer's
complete makeover
has house matching
owners' character

Outsized flavor

BakeLab co-owner
imbues pastries
with Michelin-star
expertise

A lot of growing

Champaign couple
turned city residential
plot into garden oasis





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BakeLab co-owner and executive pastry chef Dai 'Stacy' Shi is constantly refining the skills she learned while working at a Michelin-starred restaurant in New York City.

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On our cover

Construction equipment sits outside the new façade of Dionne Clifton's home in southeast Urbana as crews prepare to pour the driveway. The real-estate agent first started thinking about building a home in 2022 and moved in late last year.

Photo provided

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at home

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Home sweet home



As this new year unfolds, we are focused on new beginnings: new trends, new homes, refreshed rooms, new ventures, and for us here at the magazine, a new Q&A feature. Each issue will feature a different real-estate agent answering your questions about owning a home.

This issue in particular will be of interest to anyone thinking about homeownership. Whether you already own a home and are considering finding someplace new, or you want to take the leap for the first time, we have some helpful information.

My conversation with Dionne Clifton about the process of building a new home was especially fascinating. I wish I'd had her as a resource when we built our home 26 years ago! We had no idea how long it would take and were lucky that the sweet couple who bought our old house allowed us to rent it back from them for an extra month until construction was completed on our new home. With two kiddos under 4, that would've been a nightmare to pack up and move twice!

So, be sure to check out all that this issue has to offer. Not only do we have much to say about homes and gardens, but we also feature another talented local chef who spent time working at a Michelin-starred restaurant before making her way back to Urbana. She is an extraordinary pastry chef who has been around the world learning to make light, lovely pastries that are unlike anything else you'll find around town. We really are lucky to have so many talented individuals living here, and I plan to continue searching them out so we can showcase their work in future issues.

As always, please feel free to send story ideas my way.

Until next time, cheers!



Dionne Clifton's new home in southeast Urbana is all studs, pipes and wiring during the framing process, as shown from the second floor looking down to the first. Clifton had a hands-on approach in the process from site selection to design and through construction.

Photo provided

— Carolyn

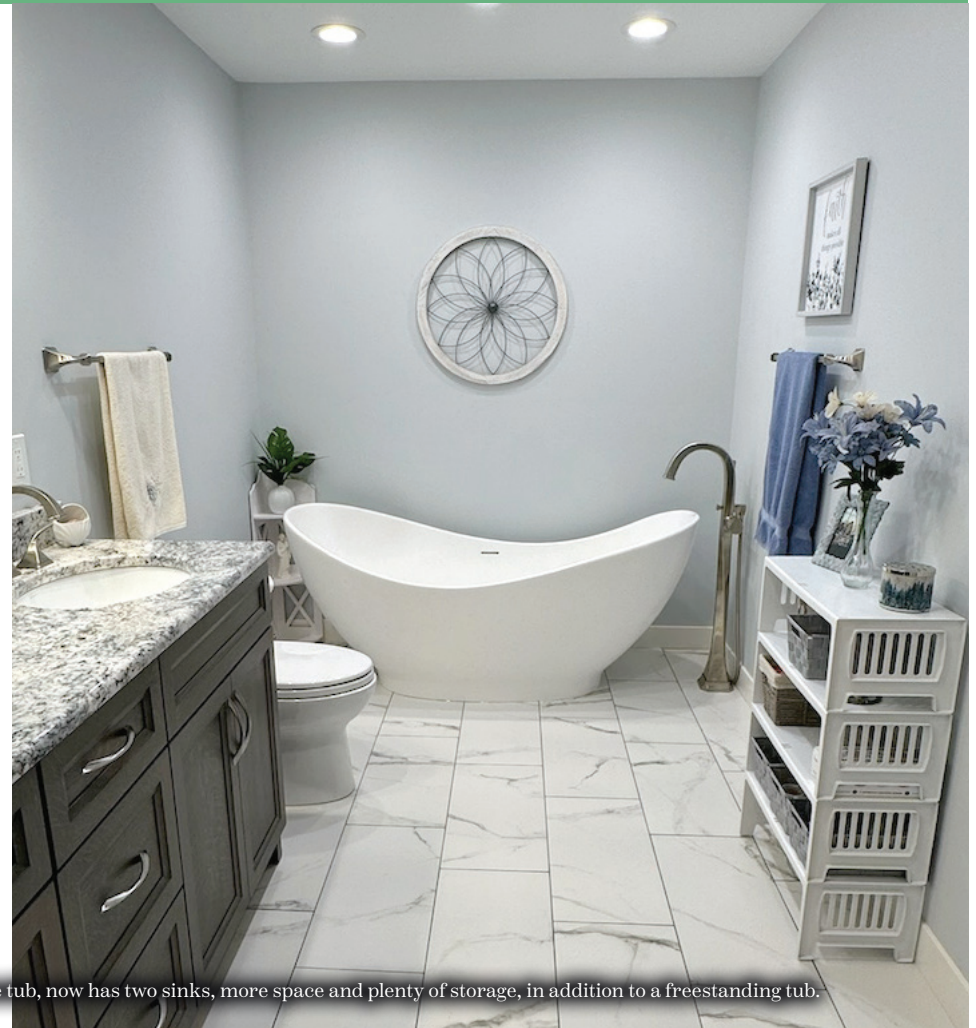
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COMPLETE overhaul

Champaign-based interior designer Deb Brinkmann turned a local couple's home, once belonging to the wife's father and untouched in 40 years, into one reflective of its new denizens



The wife's bathroom, which had only one sink and where she had been keeping clothes in the tub, now has two sinks, more space and plenty of storage, in addition to a freestanding tub.



Story Molly Sweeney  Photos Provided

Deb Brinkmann, a seasoned interior designer with nearly 50 years of experience, has built a reputation in the Champaign-Urbana area for creating spaces that aren't just stylish, but deeply personal. Her philosophy is simple: A home should reflect the people who live there, not the designer behind it.

This personalized approach was evident in a recent project, where Deb completely overhauled an entire house.

She said the process took about a year, while most of her projects take between three to six months.

"We touched every room in that house," Deb says. "I can't think of anything that we didn't replace in that home. Now,

that's not always the case. That's a very unusual scenario."

The home originally belonged to the owner's father and had not been renovated for about 40 years.

Deb said they updated two bedrooms, three bathrooms, one office, a laundry room, a kitchen, a dining room and so much more.



The fireplace, formerly surrounded by artificial stones made by a friend of the owner's father, were relocated outside to the landscaping and it was tiled instead, making it look bigger.



"There's lots of decisions to make," she says. "I think what I do when I help somebody is to ask them, 'What is your view? What are (your) ideas?' So I hope I bring to the table some ideas that they haven't thought of for their house. But it is their house, so I want it to be their house. So, I ask them for lots of pictures so I can get a flavor of what they're thinking."

Deb says the timeline for this home followed other home renovations she's done.

First, she talks to her clients to understand what they want their home to look like and how they see themselves using it. Next up, the homeowners hire a contractor. The contractor will help

The details

- Interior Design: Deb Brinkmann
- Contractor: G.H. Peters Construction
- Kitchen Cabinets: Okaw Valley Woodworking

figure out if the plan is actually feasible. After that, Deb helps smooth out the details on the choices made, like what stain the cabinets might be and if that stain matches the plan for the kitchen flooring. Then, Deb says, the physical work begins.

"This client wanted to ... brighten the house up," Deb says. "We started the plan just to do the kitchen and living room ... but as this project went on, she said, 'Well,

- Vinyl Plank Flooring: Tarkett Home
- Tile: Virginia Tile Company
- TV Cabinet: Dovetail Furniture
- Area Rug: Jaunty

can you draw plans for the bathroom? Can you do a plan for this bathroom?"

As the project evolved, more areas of the house were updated to fit the homeowners' desire for a modern, bright, functional space. One of the most striking changes was the fireplace. The owner's father did the stonework around it.

"Evidently, there was a friend who made those stones. They weren't real stones;

they were artificial, and he loved that," Deb says.

The owners thought about bringing the stones from the fireplace into the kitchen, but eventually decided to take them outside as a part of the landscaping.

Once the stone was removed, they tiled the entire fireplace. The result is that it looks bigger, even though it really isn't, Deb says: "That stone was just so busy."

In the kitchen, Deb said a lot of changes took place. All of the old appliances were replaced, the wallpaper was taken out, the walls were repainted, an island was added and all the soffits were removed.



“The kitchen was a total remodel,” Deb says. “The first thing for a kitchen is we pick cabinets, because that helps us with flooring; that helps us with countertops. And then we start going with the list, going down with all the other things you have to pick.”

The renovated bathrooms experienced various levels of change. The couple each has their own bathroom, and the husband’s was the first to be renovated.

“It was very small and there was no storage,” Deb says. “And her husband, that’s kind of like his bathroom coming in from work. We needed storage there. We needed a nice shower in there. We put a huge closet in the bathroom.”

Before the renovations, the wife also didn’t have as much storage as she needed in her bathroom, Deb says, but the work they did fixed that.

The tub “is where she kept some clothes,” Deb says. “You couldn’t even use that tub. And it just had one sink.”

When they remodeled, they put in a vanity with two sinks, installed a new freestanding bathtub and tile, and painted the walls.

After all of the renovations, Deb says the couple is making better use of their house. Previously, they didn’t use their living room because of the awkward layout. The television

sat in the middle of the room because there was nowhere else to put it, she says.

The large amount of stone around the fireplace also didn’t allow them to put furniture near it. But because of the renovations, they were able to rearrange their living room to suit their needs.

The kitchen renovations were a big win for the husband, Deb says, because he likes to cook.

While this large-scale renovation took about a year, Deb emphasizes that smaller, more budget-friendly changes can also have a significant impact.



Changes to the living room allowed the owners to make use of it again, with a spot for the television and rearranging the furniture.

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“I would say paint can change up your home,” Deb says, adding that light fixtures are another simple fix. “It doesn’t have to cost a fortune to update. You could look at one or two pieces of furniture. An area rug could change things. A lot of people have artificial plants or flowers; new ones would change your look.”

“I would say, keep your sofas as neutral as possible,” she adds. “If you could keep the main furniture in your house neutral, whether it be a neutral brown, black or green even, you can change it by throwing an inexpensive area rug down below and some pillows, and all of a sudden, it changes the look of your house.”

Deb also recommends trying to do smaller home renovations a little at a time. Her home is 8 years old and she tries to do something new each year, whether that be a new sofa, a new fan, or something else entirely. In the long run, Deb says it’s a financially smart decision, and that it’s important to enjoy the home you live in.

“Some people say, ‘I shouldn’t put this much money into my home.’ That’s their choice,” she says. “I think that if they do not have any plans of leaving, if they like where they live, they like the neighbors, they walk to places, or they like being out in the country, who’s to say how much money you shouldn’t put into the home? Enjoy it while you can.”

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EAST meets MIDWEST

A New York Michelin-starred restaurant's loss is central Illinois' gain as Dai 'Stacy' Shi channeled her pastry expertise into a new purpose as co-owner of BakeLab



BakeLab co-owner and executive pastry chef Dai 'Stacy' Shi, with one of her croissants.



Story Carolyn Maille-Petersen  Photos Provided

Dai “Stacy” Shi, executive pastry chef and co-owner of BakeLab, was living in New York City when the pandemic hit in 2020.

At the time, she was working under the executive pastry chef at Michelin-starred restaurant Daniel, but like everywhere else, restaurants closed down, leaving her in limbo. She moved home to Illinois, fully planning a return to the hustle of fine

dining when restaurants reopened.

Luckily for Champaign-Urbana residents, the talent that took her to NYC is also what kept her in central Illinois after the pandemic subsided. While stuck at home,

Dai began experimenting with new recipes. She shared her creations on social media, which quickly caught the attention of her followers. Soon, people were reaching out to request pastries.

Mutual friends connected her with BrewLab Coffee’s owner, Tim Chao, who agreed to sell her goodies at his campus coffee shop, and that was the beginning of a fruitful partnership.

What eventually followed was an exciting

opportunity: A developer was looking to open a new-concept bakery in Urbana. Dai and Tim decided to take a chance, and BakeLab was born. The first location worked out so well, they opened a Champaign location inside Lodgic Coworking late last year. They are also in the process of buying a central kitchen so they can expand their reach to other restaurants and coffee shops.

Dai is passionate about pastries and baking, and has taken advantage of opportunities to hone her skills whenever possible.



Every year, she attends classes or forums with talented chefs from around the globe. Last summer, she spent a week in Spain taking classes from Pastry World Cup Champion Jordi Bordas, a chef who makes healthier, lighter versions of pastries.

The previous November, she spent 18 days attending the Asia Pastry Forum in Malaysia. While there, she took six three-day intensives with famous pastry chefs. She had the opportunity not only to learn in a classroom setting, but also to ask them questions.

In addition, she spent time in Paris and Toronto eating and drinking her way through pastry and coffee shops for research purposes. Back in the States, she took a master class in cake decorating from Maggie Austin, a renowned cake artist based out of Washington, D.C.

She attends these forums and intensives not necessarily to learn how to make someone else's recipes, but rather to have a "deeper understanding," she says, "like the reason or the science" behind it. She wants to know the how and the why

so she can create original pastries and baked goods of her own.

When she's not globe-trotting to expand her knowledge and skills, she's thinking up new recipes for BakeLab. Her customers are what drive her. She likes to surprise and delight customers with new menu items. While they have some menu items that are always available, she also has new and original seasonal items available that she and her team of pastry chefs create.

Her goal is to invent pastries that are unlike anything else you can get in Champaign-Urbana, and she does that by blending French and Asian influences. She likes the lighter sweetness and texture of Asian flavors, and that's where she focuses her experimentation.

"I think, actually, that's probably what makes us unique," Dai says. "That's where I want it to be."

But she's not the only one coming up with new and different items for the shops. She's a big believer in giving the people she oversees the opportunity to shine.

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While she comes up with the majority of the new offerings, she also encourages her staff to be creative. They've even had internal bake-offs where they are given an ingredient and have to come up with something that includes it. Some of those items have landed on the Bakelab menu.

Her ultimate goal is two-pronged. She wants to give people items that not only taste good but also have unique flavor profiles made with healthier ingredients, or that are gluten-, dairy- or sugar-free. She also wishes to offer them something they can't get anywhere else.

It's the excitement and delight she sees and hears when customers come in that gives her the greatest satisfaction. 



From the **GROUND UP**



*Real-estate agent **Dionne Clifton** was heavily involved in every step of the arduous process of building her dream home in southeast Urbana*





Thinking about building a new home? Be sure to have your ducks in a row before you begin. And expect it to take at least a year, even after you close on the home, says Dionne Clifton.

These pearls of wisdom were hard won, as Dionne just moved into her new custom-built home late last year.

At that time, she was still dealing with a fairly lengthy punch list of items that needed to be completed. In her experience as a real-estate agent, this is not unusual, so she advises anyone who is thinking of building to be prepared for complications and delays. While most houses don't actually take a year to complete, it's better to have that extra time built in than to be scrambling for a place to stay if your new house isn't ready for occupancy.

The day we met, she had workers in the house installing tile in her guest bathroom. She was also waiting for a new panel for her dishwasher to replace the one that had been installed backward. Her furniture was in, her kitchen cupboards were artfully arranged, and her Christmas tree twinkled in the living room, but her beverage pantry was under construction, the stairs in her bedroom needed wood flooring, and her yard was a muddy mess. Despite all that, she was thrilled to be in and making strides toward completion.

How it began

But let's go back to the beginning. Dionne began thinking about building a home in 2022, and her first task was finding the right lot on which to build. She knew she wanted to be in Stone Creek because she grew up in Urbana, she loved the location, and she had friends and family nearby.

She looked at a few lots before narrowing it down. Once she found one she liked, she visited it at all times of the day and night to ensure she made the best use of the light in her home design. She bought that lot overlooking the golf course in December 2022 because she could position her home such that she could not only see the sunset, but also a little bit of the sunrise.

"I would never recommend that someone buy a lot without standing on it and making sure that's where you want to be," she says.

Simultaneously, Dionne was working on the plans for her house. She started by browsing websites that offered floor plans for sale. She decided on the elements she wanted for her own home, borrowing ideas from multiple plans. She also followed Facebook groups for people who are building homes. She gleaned a lot of practical insights from those sites, she says, from where to place electrical outlets to pre-empting pests once framing was complete.

She also consulted her Pinterest page, where she had been collecting ideas for her dream home for years. Then she worked with a drafter for about six months to come up with a rough floor plan. After a lot of back and forth, she had a completed draft.

The next step was to find the right builder. She spent about six months interviewing people before settling on Adam Rebholz at Signature Homes. It was an added bonus that Signature had an in-house architect who took the drafter's work and drew up the more technical plans needed for construction purposes. Once the floor plan was done and Dionne was satisfied, she signed a contract with Signature in February 2024 to begin construction.

How it went

"We were supposed to break ground in March (2024), but we had a lot of issues with the city and permitting," she says matter-of-factly, "so then we ended up breaking ground in May."

"The first big hiccup was (that) the city of Urbana had a new code requirement that required ... a sprinkler system be installed in houses over a certain amount of square feet," Dionne says.






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She and her builder disagreed with the city on how the home's square footage was interpreted, which meant they had to schedule a special hearing to argue their case. They did eventually get the permit, but it delayed groundbreaking by two months.

The second "drama," as she called it, was the fireplace.

"My builder will say it was my fault," she says with a chuckle. "I will just say, you know, I like what I like. I know what I want."

As she tells it, the fireplace juttied out into the living room more than she wanted, making it look and feel "too bulky." Figuring out how to give her the minimalist look she wanted without impacting the fireplace venting ended up delaying construction by two to three weeks, according to her estimates.

The other big delay revolved around the bathrooms. The one in the primary suite was a challenge for multiple reasons, she admits.

"Again, I'm very particular," she says. "I know what I want. I'm never confused about what I want. What I'm confused

about is, am I gonna be able to afford it?"

Dionne wanted a specific tile that her contractor couldn't provide, so she found someone else who had what she wanted and could install it. Additionally, the tile itself was more costly, and having to search for it delayed construction by approximately eight weeks, she says.

A lot of smaller delays are part of the deal, too, she adds.

"That's why it's so important that when you're building, especially a custom build with, like, very custom details, you have to be patient and give yourself a little bit more time," she says.

It definitely helps to have a good sense of humor, because despite these delays, Dionne seems to have a good working relationship with her builder. Throughout our chat, her self-deprecating humor made it clear she knows she is particular and that delays are the trade-off for being exacting.

Once ground was broken, she checked in every day that work was done.

“There’s not a day that I would let contractors be here and I wouldn’t come and see what they did afterwards,” she says.

And that’s her second bit of advice: Be involved.

“That’s how you make sure that what you’re getting is what you want,” she says. “There’s not a world in which I would recommend going two weeks without visiting your build, especially if it’s custom.”

Catching mistakes early is key.

“You’ll come over and the paint color will be wrong, or the door handles will be wrong, and it’s not anyone’s fault,” she says. “It’s just the nature of, like, communication.”

Which leads to her third bit of advice: “Really go through your plans with a fine-tooth comb.” This saves you and your builder and contractors time, money and aggravation. When you don’t examine the little details, that’s when problems occur, like budget overruns.

Budgeting advice

Why do people go over budget?

“It’s a lot of things,” says Dionne. “It could be the time. It could be the material.”

If your budget accounts for quartz countertops but then you decide you want quartzite, you are going to go over budget. If you make changes after work has been completed, that will add to the budget.

Dionne recounts deciding that some of the inset lighting was too close together and wanted it moved farther apart. This meant bringing the electrician back, which of course costs more money. She also had the window frames in the primary suite moved up because they were too low in relation to her nightstands. That cost money to change, too.

“Any time they have to bring those contractors back beyond their original scope of work,” she explains, “that’s going to increase your budget.”

Dionne’s advice: Sit down with your builder, go through your selections and talk to the people who will be helping you select flooring, cabinets, lights, paint colors, drawer pulls — all the details, from the biggest to the smallest. Then you aren’t caught off-guard by costs.

“People will say, ‘OK, you have a \$3,000 budget for your lighting,’” she says. “And that seems like a lot of money, but you need to see what your kind of taste is, because if your taste is somewhere closer to \$5,000, then before you even have signed (a contract), the contractor is already \$2,000 over budget.”





If you want a specific type of lighting or cabinetry, for example, find it and get an estimate, she says. And a good builder will help with this process.

“My builder did a good job of being like, ‘Here are the stair rails that are in your budget,’” Dionne says. “And I’m like, ‘That’s very nice, thank you; that’s not what I want. Those are the conversations you want to have before you sign on the dotted line.’”

Be realistic about what you can and can’t afford, where you want to spend your money and where you’re willing to cut back, she says.

One way Dionne cut costs was by prioritizing.

“I went all out on the kitchen and the bathroom and the primary suite,” she says, but pared down the size of the guest bedrooms. This reduced her total square footage, and therefore her costs. She also bought the high-end appliances she wanted, but at a significant discount, from an appliance store on eBay.

Alleviating stress of building

It is easy to get overwhelmed when going through the building and decision-making process, but there are some ways to alleviate that stress, Dionne says. Focus on the “big stuff,” such as the floor plan, flooring, cabinets, siding

and roof. These are the items that are the most expensive to change. Then, have fun with the rest of it.

With all this being said, Dionne emphasizes that there are many ways to go about building a house. The route she chose was more complicated because she wanted to create her own floor plan and make all of the decisions. She worked with a drafter first to save money; others might prefer to work with an architect from the beginning. But if even that’s too daunting, there are other, easier ways to get a new-construction home.

Find a completed floor plan you like and go from there. If even that sounds like more than you want to bite off, find a home that is already under construction and just make the cosmetic choices, like paint colors, cabinetry and flooring. There are as many ways to build a home as there are people who want to go through the process.

And it’s helpful to have the right attitude. Dionne’s mentor gave her some words of wisdom that she has come to appreciate: “Even when it’s done, it’s not done,” she says.

Once you live in a home, you’ll find things about it that you want to tweak, “but that’s OK,” she adds. “I think that’s kind of also a part of the beauty of the process is that you still get to kind of refine it with the input and the knowledge that you only get better.”



The details

- Cabinets: Miller’s Holzwerk Kitchens
- Countertops: C & I Stone Design
- Tile work and driveway: DECA Improvements
- Lighting: Springfield Electric, CB2 and Restoration Hardware
- Glass and mirrors: Contractor Services for Illinois
- Artwork: Michelle Trautman Art
- Furnishings: Restoration Hardware, CB2, Plank + Beam, Native Citizen

The timeline

- Groundbreaking: May 6, 2024
- Footings installed: Mid-May
- Foundation poured: Late May
- Framing: Mid-June
- Roof: Late June
- Electrical and plumbing work: July and early August
- Siding: Early August
- Drywall installation: Mid-August to September
- Flatwork (driveway and sidewalks): Early October
- Tilework (floors and walls): Early October
- Hardwood floors installed: Mid-October
- Kitchen cabinets installed: Late October
- Countertops installed: Mid-November
- Furniture move-in: Mid-November
- Interior doors installed: Early December
- Closed on home: Dec. 13, 2024



ROOM to GROW

For the past 17 years, **Dale** and **Eileen Herrstrom** have turned a residential lot in the heart of south Champaign into a bountiful garden



Dale Herrstrom in his garden in his garden on a residential lot at the corner of Prospect Avenue and Ayrshire Drive in south Champaign.



Story Charlotte Ebel  Photos Robin Scholz

For most people, maintaining a small backyard garden can be quite a chore; for Dale and Eileen Herrstrom of Champaign, this couldn't be further from the case.

They are the proud proprietors of a residential-lot-sized private garden at the corner of Prospect Avenue and Ayrshire Drive, nestled between homes and within a block of Bottenfield Elementary School and Art Mart. The lot's location and size is fit for a family home, but instead houses rows of diverse produce ranging from candy onions to giant cabbages.

The Herrstroms have tended the lot for the past 17 years. When they moved to town in 1995, it immediately caught their eye.

"We only live a block and a half away, and we just kept driving past this garden lot that was here," Dale says.

Even back then, gardening was nothing new for the Herrstroms. Dale has been gardening for as long as he can remember, and when they married in 1978, Eileen quickly entered the fold.

They formerly lived in upstate Illinois, where they kept a regular garden, but moved to Champaign after Eileen was hired by the geology department at the University of Illinois. Finding a new garden became a priority, but nothing they tried seemed quite right. So when the lot on Prospect and Ayrshire went up for sale, the Herrstroms jumped on it immediately and never looked back.

After nearly two decades cultivating their garden, the Herrstroms have fallen into habits, keeping many things the same each year, while also being forced to adapt in other ways. Dale was previously known for his award-winning giant pumpkins — weighing in at about 600 pounds — which earned him a feature article in a 2008 edition of this magazine.

But when disease infiltrated his soil a couple years ago, he had no choice but to take a break and let the soil heal itself. Instead, he pivoted to fresh produce. After some experimentation, he now has favorite crops that he can rely on year after year, including chocolate cherry tomatoes, butternut squash, top-cropped green beans and gypsy broccoli, just to name a few.



Beyond these “old reliables,” Dale still finds ways to experiment with new crops by using his green thumb to help out his friends.

“I’ve had a lot of different things that I can fill a garden with and enjoy growing and then give it away,” he says. “This year, I’m growing hot peppers for a young guy across the street from where we live. He wants to get into making hot sauces, but to get the variety of the different hot peppers to make the sauces is difficult ... so I’m growing 20 different varieties of peppers for him.

“It’s just while I’m here, I might as well be doing something,” he quips.

Thanks to a combination of their gardening skill and their lot’s size, the amount of produce the Herrstroms grow each year rises well above their ability to consume it. Instead, they make regular donations to the food pantry at Grace Lutheran Church, where Dale is also a board member.

“That way, the people who are clients there and come for the free food opportunity get fresh stuff instead of just canned stuff,” Dale says.

He has never sought payment for anything he’s grown — for him, “it’s a labor of love.”

Despite this love of gardening, Dale and Eileen did consider selling the lot several years ago. But with the onset of the pandemic, their perspectives changed. Having a large outdoor space suddenly gained more value.

“When COVID hit, this was kind of a refuge for Dale,” Eileen says. “He and his friends would sit in the shade of the wisteria and talk.”

“We did that a couple times a week, just to stay in touch,” Dale adds. “And we still do that.”

Although the Herrstroms were not the first couple to use their lot as a garden, they know they could be the last — when they do eventually sell, they understand the buyers might have a different use in mind. However, they’re at peace with their legacy.

“When we put it up, we’ll just put it up,” Dale says. “It’s residential, so they can do whatever they want to. It’s kind of a lot of money to invest in something just for fun.”

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Luckily, the Herrstroms' botanical involvements in town extend beyond their private garden. Dale avidly grows bonsai, and helped to found the Bonsai Society of Central Illinois in 1998.

The group has grown to about 30

members, meeting monthly in the University of Illinois' plant sciences labs.

For Dale, this monthly commitment is just the tip of the iceberg — he recently bought 500 Japanese maple seedlings, which he grows both in the garden and in a

greenhouse in his backyard. He even spent a few years selling his bonsai at the UI Japan House's annual Matsuri Festival.

Between the produce, giant pumpkins and bonsai, Dale spends somewhere between two and three hours daily at the

garden, sometimes more. All this might sound like a heavy workload, especially post-retirement. But Dale doesn't see it that way.

"It's fun," he says. "If it wasn't fun, I probably wouldn't do it." 

KEEPING IT REAL (ESTATE)

What to know about buying a home with ... RE/MAX Realty's **Darnell Cox**

Story **Molly Sweeney**

Photo **Provided**

Welcome to our new question-and-answer feature about homeownership. In each issue, we will chat with a different real-estate agent to get their take on some of the things people need to consider if they are thinking about jumping into the housing market. To kick things off, we spoke with Realtor Darnell Cox.

Q: What increases a home's value?

A: This question can be looked at from a buyer perspective or an appraisal perspective. Most buyers will look at the condition of the home to see what updates they would need or like to make. An experienced real-estate agent would also make the buyer aware of the age of the roof and mechanical items such as the furnace, air-conditioning unit and water heater. According to the National Association of Realtors, factors that significantly increase a home's value based on appraisal include major renovations like kitchen and bathroom upgrades, adding square footage, improving energy-efficiency with upgrades like new HVAC systems, installing modern appliances, enhancing curb appeal, and making structural improvements like a new roof or electrical-system updates.

Q: What is a good long-term investment to look for in a home?

A: We have been taught that location, location and location are important to the long-term value of a home. The location as it pertains to schools, shopping and other amenities can affect a home's value, as well as crime and the condition of the homes in the neighborhood. Job



opportunities also weigh heavily on home values. Other factors like energy efficiency and recent upgrades or renovations help the long-term investment as well.

Q: What is something that homeowners or future homeowners should know that they might never think to ask?

A: There are a lot of factors to consider when buying a home that I was not aware of prior to becoming

a Realtor. One is buy now, refinance later. Buyers have the idea that they should wait for interest rates to come down. But home prices are increasing, so the longer you wait, that can offset the lower interest rate you are hoping to get.

Home values steadily increase yearly in most areas of the United States. Since 2019, home prices have risen nearly 30 percent. As a result, a typical home is about \$80,000 more expensive than pre-pandemic.

Seasonal home pricing is also a factor. Off-season home purchases can help buyers get a better value as there are fewer people looking to buy. Many sellers prefer not to move in the winter, meaning there is more competition for buyers in the spring and summer due to the weather. Additionally, people who are renting often have their lease come to an end in the spring or summer, and when their lease expires, they may be looking to buy a home instead of renewing their rental contract. Lastly, for a lot of families with kids in school, it's easier to move in the summer.

Having the home inspected is very important to help alleviate any unexpected repairs and prepare for future expenses. Most buyers are aware of home inspection; however, they do not factor in other inspections such as the sewer inspection. Homeowners should be aware that they are financially responsible for maintaining the sewer line where it connects from the home to the city sewer line. Older homes have less-durable sewer-line materials, and if roots from large trees invade or damage sewer lines, the homeowner will have to fund the repairs.

Finally, there are loan programs where buyers do not need a down payment. An experienced real-estate agent can help negotiate other buyer fees to where a buyer could need little upfront money to buy a home. Out-of-pocket expenses could be as little as \$1,500 to \$2,000 total. 

Darnell Cox is a real estate agent, Realtor mentor and designated managing broker for RE/MAX Realty Associates in Champaign, Mahomet and Monticello.

Ask the expert

It's that time of year again for a select list of the newest interior-design trends in our area! These trends are specifically what we are seeing in central Illinois. Please keep in mind that whatever you love is what should be designed for your own space, whether it's "on trend" or not. As interior designers, our intention is never to push you towards a trend, but instead to take your style and what you love and turn that into an updated reality. Here is a sampling of the trends.

Range alcoves

In Victorian times, a kitchen-stove alcove was once an important feature for containing the heat from wood cooking stoves. The stove was set into a recessed opening and often outlined in brick or stone. The alcoves were a way to help fireproof the kitchen. Nowadays, a range alcove is made to create a focal point in the kitchen, and to create a designated nook for the cook.

Fluting, reeding and scalloped edges

Reeding, fluting and scalloped edges are it for the newest style of cabinetry and furniture. There are several ways to incorporate fluting into your designs, and different widths for the flutes themselves. You can do reeding in painted finishes or stained finishes. It's such a fun way to add personality to your project.

Metal accents on cabinetry

For 2025, we are loving the look of incorporating different materials into cabinetry designs, especially custom metal accents. These include metal accents on hoods, mesh inserts into cabinet doors, toppers for trash cabinets, and so much more!

Flat black countertops

For a while, black countertops were out, but they are back, baby! Black countertops in a honed (matte) finish rather than the glossy look of the past are the style now. Black adds a bold contrast to create that dramatic look people want in their homes this year.



Custom 'vintage' tile mosaics

We are also loving custom vintage-inspired tile mosaics so much, and they are fully customizable! Penny rounds or small hexagons can be used to create patterns in almost any color.

Ten-foot ceilings

In the old days, 8-foot ceilings were the standard and 9-foot ceilings were considered the desirable upgrade. These days, we are seeing 9-foot ceilings as the standard with 10-foot ceiling upgrades happening more and more frequently.

Ten-foot ceilings pose an interesting challenge for cabinetry design. Previously, the style was to have cabinets extending all the way to the ceiling. With a 10-foot ceiling, that can make the cabinets feel

proportionally top heavy. So with these higher ceilings, we are seeing the use of taller crown moldings, breaking up the cabinets into the "stacked cabinets" look, the return of soffits (which you can incorporate to look like a tray or ceiling feature) and even cabinets that do not go to the ceiling being in style again.

To read about more design trends for 2025, please visit the link in the QR code below. 

Elizabeth Yager is the principal designer and owner of Elizabeth Yager Designs and EYD Fine Cabinetry in Effingham. If you have a question for this column, submit it to athome@news-gazette.com.



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